DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 686 CS 204 342

AUTHOR Clara, Louise P.
TITLE Mastery Learning in the Writing Lab.
PUB DATE Feb 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College (13th, Nashville, Tennessee, February 16-18, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Cues; Disadvantaged Youth; English Instruction; Feedback; *Individualized Instruction; Junior Colleges; Learning Laboratories; *Mastery Learning; Reinforcement; Remedial Instruction; *Remedial Programs; Student Participation; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The four components of quality instruction identified by Benjamin Bloom in "Human Characteristics and School Learning" (1976) form the basis of a remedial composition program designed for disadvantaged junior college students. The first component, cues for learning, is programed into the packets of student materials. These cues include identifying what is to be learned and the proposed approach, relating new with understood learning experiences, and providing identification modes and illustrations. Two other components, participation and reinforcement, occur through practice checks of student work and posttests, and the sense of achievement students feel when they know that they are learning. The final component, feedback/corrections, exists in discussion of work unit posttests and through a process of continual diagnosis and record keeping. Index cards are used to record each student's performance and level of placement. Errors are recorded through a simple coding system that designates the error and describes its origin. (A sample record and its interpretation is included.) (HAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Louise P. Clara

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED159686

MASTERY LEARNING IN THE WRITING LAB

Louise P. Clara
South Georgia College

Confronted by the educational challenge of the century -- Benjamin S. Bloom's assertion that "under favorable conditions of school learning almost all humans can achieve the best that any other humans have achieved" -- educators have to question whether optimum learning conditions exist for enough students in their areas of responsibility. Trying to meet this challenge, to resolve the question of how to modify the ideal "one student learning something" well to a satisfactory many learning something well led to an operational plan for mastery learning in remedial composition now being used at South Georgia College.

South Georgia College is small, rural, and isolated. It draws its student body from an area in which the disadvantaged is in the majority. The oldest two-year college in Georgia, it has much that is unique -- a two-hundred acre campus, century-old pines, dormitories. As with many two-year colleges it is a mutation -- a junior college existing in toe-hold status to the senior college or university and a community college which must recruit and retain the nontraditional students in its eight county "community" in order to survive.

The remedial composition program at the college helps to address one of the most critical academic needs of the disadvantaged students who make up 51 percent of the total enrollment -- development of verbal skills. It attempts to provide what is generally considered to be the conditions most favorable to learning, one student - one teacher, in classrooms where a twenty-to-one ratio exists. To accomplish this, some practicalities of the new age and some contemporary theories and practices directly related to the disadvantaged student and to the teaching of writing have been put to use.

CS204342

A design procedure which is applicable and successful from the age of technology and systems management frees teachers from tasks which use their time inefficiently. Applying Bloom's concept of what constitutes quality of instruction, it exercises quality control. In line with the enlightening examination of basic writing problems by Mina P. Shaughnessy, it recasts attitudes toward problems with language, involving instructors in linguistic analyses of writing which seeks the message which the error carries in order to discover how to teach its corrections.

Naturally this system did not emerge fully conceptualized. It began with the recognition that both the humanistic and the behavioristic viewpoints had merit -- that a mean that incorporated them had the best chance to benefit the student. If classroom procedures could be set up so that instructors' time in class could be spent with the individual student, the person of the student could be recognized and served. If the student could be "trained" to study independently, helped to understand his errors and his progress, be given timely, adequate reinforcement, his behavior as a learner could be affected favorably. To achieve the desired environment, a classroom operation was devised. It set up materials and personal folders so that they were retrievable by the student, procedures for the student to follow, and a system of record keeping and work checks that allowed advance preparation by the instructor. Actually, elements of Bloom's mastery learning theory and Shaughnessy's error analyses procedures entered at this point into the operation's plan of instruction, although they were published somewhat later. Bloom was to identify in Human Characteristics and School Learning (1976) four components of quality instruction which were being provided adequately in this setting, and the shifting, discarding, and cataloging of teaching materials, together with the record keeping process which identified types of errors and the syntactical patterns and miscues which were common in their ocurrence, began to place the error with its message. In 1977

Mina P. Shaughnessy was to publish Errors and Expectations, the result of ten years of such research and of brilliant linguistic analyses which have been a fine source of improvement in understanding and technique for instructors of basic writing.

The approach became a humanized system that used all the "machinery" available to release the instructor for human contact. For those who deal with a wide range of learning levels in composition and consequently must individualize, its operations and procedures will be described in some detail here, but the only necessities for putting it to work are instructors with some training, or adaptability for training, in classroom management and a room or laboratory where materials can be placed so that they are retrievable by the student.

The students walk in, take their individual folders from a drawer, and read the work checks from the previous meeting. They consult the instructor if there is need, then begin, either with the previous day's uncompleted assignment or with a new entry on their assignment sheets. All error assignments are based on the individual's writing which is done on the first day of class and again when errors are understood and corrected on a previous paper. Mastery of the error is attempted through learning about it as an error, correction of it on the student's own paper, and then application of the understanding to future papers.

The student entry phase of the operation is completed when the student goes to the material area and picks up the assigned units of work. A modest beginning in collecting such materials can be made through the cataloging of what is already available so that instruction in any error or writing practice can be assigned in book, pamphlet, or unit by title and page(s). Most English departments have copies of texts useful for teaching about errors and writing, some of them self-instructional, lying on shelves unused in instructor's offices. Sets of five or ten of the most promising can be bought as funds become available.

A heavy investment in any one program is often a disappointment, for only parts of them may be suitable for any particular population of students. Often English instructors have units on grammar or paragraph writing or sentence improvement which can be used. Making materials retrievable for the student and the use of exact cataloging are necessary. As instructors become more experienced in error analyses, better materials will be selected, wiser purchases made, and some materials written by instructors or aides may appear on the shelves.

Cues for learning, the first component of quality of instruction which Bloom (1976) lists, should be present in these materials. That is, they should identify what the student is to learn and how he is to go about it, relate new learning to old and to understood experiences, provide models and illustrations, and be available aurally and visually to some degree to help learners whose preferred mode of learning is not verbal. When writing or adapting available materials, the instructor should provide a pretest and a rationale to determine need and to explain purpose, chart steps of instruction with frequent practice for which answer keys are provided, and design a posttest for an instructor to check. All check-up tests and posttests are, to use Bloom's term,formative, and the summative or final test measures mastery performance to indicate mastery within context.

Participation and reinforcement, two other components of quality instruction identified by Bloom, are illustrated as the students begin work. In the first place, they have been directed through a check on past participation which is as adequate as if the instructor had only one student. In the same manner, assignments have been made that ensure present participation. Bloom summarizes that, in general, about 20 percent of the variance in individual achievement of students in twenty studies of classroom achievement was accounted for by their participation in the learning activities. It is entirely possible that the student

in the individualized classroom operation can spend the entire instructional time in covert or overt participation, thus quantitatively increasing his chances for learning.

Reinforcement is secured through the knowledge the students receive that they are learning, first on the practice checks at the end of the short steps of instruction, then with the posttest, checks made by the instructor at the end of the work unit, and finally as they apply what they have learned to the correction and improvement of their papers.

In the individualized classroom or laboratory, the final component of quality instruction identified by Bloom, feedback/corrections, exists in the discussions of work unit posttests. It is here that the instructor can identify what has not been understood and suggest correctives, either recycling or new material, and it is here that the instructor can discuss the points of misunderstanding with the students. Sometimes the student has mastered learning in that unit and is ready to correct a paper or to receive a new assignment. Again the best use of instructor time has been realized. In Block's report (1971, 1974) on achievement outcomes in control and mastery learning classes frequently taught by the same instructor, the major difference between the two classes was the use of feedback/corrective procedures. In one study by Block (1970), 50 percent of the possible score was made by the control group, while in the experimental group, which received feedback and correctives, the average student scored within 90 percent of the possible score on the same tasks.

Minor details of the operation of the system are the use of sign-out sheets which refer an instructor to a student's folder if that student needs work checked or a new assignment (assuring that work continues but allowing the instructor some relief from checking all folders each day) and the use of group work, small and large, which can be conveniently arranged because of the analyses of errors.

The success of the operation is made possible because of the process of continual diagnosis and record keeping which assures that students are placed in the materials that they need and that they attain mastery of an error. On 5 by 7 inch cards a record of each student's performance and levels placement is kept. Errors made on writing samples are listed according to category and frequency. Three comparative levels of error usage are recognized: major, serious, and minor. Simple coding is used to designate the error and to describe its origin. On a card the following entries might occur:

```
                                  2x                    2x
9/16 Paper 1: 0-4-16 (261) C/S (,it) (,she) SV (s)

(compound); c/As, c/When; c/un (,and) c/and; c/but; c/un

(that); Sp: hole/whole; due/do; hopeing; capible; -s;
          4x
-s/un; ed.
```

Interpretation: In this paper of approximately 261 words written 9/16, a student had no major errors (0 in the first category which represents incoherent or fused sentences), four serious errors (4 in the second category which represents sentence structure errors such as comma splice and fragment, agreement errors, tense), and sixteen minor errors (16 in the third category which represents spelling, punctuation, capitalization, word endings, etc.). The extended code shows that the comma splice errors (C/S) occurred where pronouns were used as subjects of the second clause (,it) (,she), that subject-verb errors (SV) are basic (failure to use the plural form of the verb with the plural noun [-s]) and particular (the requirement for recognizing that a compound subject requires a plural verb). In number 3 errors, comma problems abound: failure to place a comma after an introductory dependent clause (c/As; c/When); before a coordinating conjunction (c/and); (c/but); and particular uses of the comma unnecessarily c/un (,and); c/un (that). The misspelling shows

a need for studying homonyms and suffixes; the last three entries show that dialect problems surfaced in inflectional endings (-ed) and in noun plurals (-s) (-s/un).

Although at first glance the record keeping seems complicated and tedious, it is no more so than any form of tabulating daily occurences, and it provides results that cannot be realized in any other way. Because of such records, for example, I discovered when an "F" might not be an "F". The paper above marked 0-4-16 (261) and a subsequent paper marked 0-5-13 (250) by the same student does not mean that the student is not learning. On the contrary, the record can show that he is. For Paper 2 had no comma splice errors and had different kinds of subject-verb agreement errors. Such occurences made me question further the use of a certain number of points for a grade, especially to indicate a failure to learn. For the student who is mired in the quicksands of language learning and faced with the seemingly infinite possibilities for error contained in one halting sentence, progress is always out of sight unless some refinement of record keeping can show hope.

Other useful features of the detailed record are that it allows exact assignments to be made and continually provides insight into why students make particular mistakes.

Mastery learning is, of course, more than providing quality of instruction. It involves constructing objectives and measures for units within a major frame of operation. What has been suggested here can be extended to that point with the exit requirements for the writing course becoming the summative tests. Skills units within the individualized course are then defined for formative testing.

Although not a panacea, the individualized program using mastery learning can provide the individual and the instructor with some surety about performance that has to improve eventually what is being done in remedial composition.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Block, J. H. The Effects of Various Levels of Performance on Selected Cognitive, Affective, and Time Variables. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1970.

Block, J. H. Mastery Learning: Theory and Practice. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971.

Block, J. H., ed. Schools, Society, and Mastery Learning. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974.

Bloom, Benjamin Human Characteristics and School Learning. McGraw Hill, 1976.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. Errors and Expectations. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.